CHINATOWN

A WALKING TOUR THROUGH HISTORY

THE CITY OF VANCOUVER PLANNING DEPARTMENT
THE B.C. HERITAGE TRUST
THE HERITAGE VANCOUVER SOCIETY
THE VANCOUVER MUSEUM

100-04094/

WALKING THE TOUR

The entire tour will take about two hours, beginning at the intersection of Pender and Carrall Streets. If you walk the tour during business hours, you can browse in shops. Restaurants are open for lunch and dinner. On crowded Pender Street, architectural details above street level are difficult to see. A suggestion would be to view the subject buildings from the opposite side of the street. For information on public transportation to Chinatown, telephone TRANSLINK at 521-0400.

For more information about CHINATOWN:

Walking Tour of Vancouver's Chinatown
by Paul Yee (Weller Cartographic Services, Vancouver, 1983).

Exploring Vancouver: The Essential Architectural Guide
by Harold Kalman, Ron Phillips and Robin Ward (UBC Press, Vancouver, 1993).

East as West: State, Place and the Institutionalization of Myth in Vancouver's Chinatown
by Kay Anderson (Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Geography, UBC, 1986).

Vancouver's Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875–1980
by Kay J. Anderson (McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal/Toronto, 1991).

Saltwater City: An Illustrated History of the Chinese in Vancouver
by Paul Yee (Douglas & McIntyre, Vancouver/Toronto, 1988).

Robin Ward's Vancouver
by Robin Ward (Harbour Publishing, 1990).

The Concubine's Children: Portrait of a Family Divided
by Denise Chong (Viking, Toronto, 1994).

The Jade Peony
by Wayson Choy (Douglas & McIntyre, Vancouver/Toronto, 1995).

Visit the City of Vancouver's Heritage Website at *www.city.vancouver.bc.ca*

INTRODUCING CHINATOWN

Chinatown sounds like it would be the place where most Vancouver residents of Chinese descent live. That is certainly not true today, but it was in the 1880s when the swampy fringe of False Creek around the intersection of Carrall and Pender Streets became known as Chinatown. Chinatown is one of the city's earliest commercial and residential districts, containing a remarkable collection of buildings from Vancouver's boom years in the early twentieth century. This tour will introduce you to the architecture and history of the neighbourhood.

The pioneers of British Columbia included the Chinese. Years before Vancouver was incorporated in 1886, Chinese labourers worked in the industries that built the province—in gold fields, coal mines, sawmills and canneries. Many emigrated from southern China, where English-speaking Chinese bosses recruited them to work under contract in Canada. Between 1881 and 1885, for example, 15,000 Chinese were contracted to build the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR). With the rail track completed in 1885, out of work and with little money, many came to Vancouver.

In those early years, Chinatown was overwhelmingly male. This reflected the process of recruiting men as labourers, a pattern that was reinforced in 1885 when the Canadian Government placed a head tax on incoming Chinese immigrants. Few had savings sufficient to pay the head tax required to bring over wives, children and other relatives to Canada.

Many Chinese labourers lived in Chinatown only between jobs. Often they were away from Vancouver for months at a time working at seasonal jobs, like lumbering or canning fish. In Chinatown, they usually lived in crowded rooming houses in the Pender Street area. Opium dens and gambling activities flourished. These activities frightened and fascinated white Vancouver, which both launched campaigns to close down the Chinatown "vice dens" and privately patronized them.

Not all the Chinese shared the circumscribed life of the labourers. Class distinctions in Chinatown were sharp. At the top were a handful of wealthy firms run by individuals who controlled much of the business life of Chinatown. The firms grew rich contracting workers, importing and exporting, investing in real estate, selling steamship tickets and manufacturing opium (which was legal if for export). Partners in the wealthiest firms lived in Chinatown in great luxury and elegance surrounded by their many family members.

The Chinese Arch at Hastings and Carrall Street, built for the Duke of Cornwall's visit. Photo, 1901.

More numerous were the middle-class merchants, who owned and operated green-groceries, laundries, tailor shops and other small businesses. Often they chose these occupations for lack of other options—they were barred, for instance, from working on city works by civic politicians.

The Chinese created their own associations to aid their fellows. Associations, or "tongs", based on common surnames or place of birth in China provided social activities and social services in Chinatown. Members raised funds to build the imposing headquarters that still line Pender Street. Some also sponsored rotating credit associations, a kind of lottery among friends, that provided the capital for many new Chinatown businesses.

During Vancouver's prosperous years between 1897 and 1913, Chinatown expanded as Chinese merchants invested in new properties. Chinatown was extended south along Carrall Street, west to Shanghai Alley and Canton Alley, and eventually east along Pender Street to Gore Street.

But even the wealthiest Chinese lived on the margins of Vancouver society. Discrimination took many forms, from disparaging cartoons in local newspapers to systematic harassment by City inspectors. The Chinese were not allowed to vote in city, provincial or federal elections. Powerless at the ballot box, they nevertheless actively resisted discriminatory measures. Chinese people frequently took the City to court to redress their grievances. The Chinese were not legally required to live in segregated areas, but the racially motivated hostility rampant in the rest of the city prior to World War II made it seem the wiser course.

In bad times, when jobs were scarce, anti-Chinese sentiment peaked. Union workers resented Chinese labourers because they were often used by employers to break strikes. Chinese labour bosses, hoping to maintain their supply of cheap labour, prevented contact between Chinese workers and the organized union movement.

By 1907 the boom that began with the Klondike Gold Rush of 1897 faltered. The mild recession focussed attention on Chinese workers. That year Vancouver's Asiatic Exclusion League held a rally attended by thousands. Afterwards, a mob marched on Chinatown, smashing property and looting stores. After World War I, another job shortage led to renewed calls to restrict Chinese immigration. In 1923 the Federal Government responded by bringing down a new bill that massively restricted and effectively barred all new Chinese immigration. Until its repeal 25 years later, Vancouver's Chinatown commemorated the Act's passage with an annual Humiliation Day.

The effect of the Act upon Chinatown was stagnation. The community of largely aging bachelor men was unable to grow without new immigration. The Depression also devastated Chinatown. The City legislated lower levels of relief for Chinese than for white residents, and in all, 175 patrons of Chinatown's Pender Street soup kitchen died of malnutrition during those years. During the 1930s the Vancouver Chinese community lost 6,000 people, half of its members, by death or emigration.

World War II brought dramatic change to the status of the Chinese and Chinatown in Vancouver. During the war, China fought as Canada's ally, and the war taught a powerful lesson about the folly of racism. Finally in 1947 the Canadian Government repealed the exclusionist Act. Ordinary Chinese were able to bring their wives and children from China. Chinatown, always crowded, could not contain the newcomers. Many families found homes in the old working-class neighbourhood of Strathcona, immediately east of Chinatown.

During the war and afterwards, Vancouver began to look at Chinatown in a new way. Suddenly the Chinatown that had seemed foreign, sinister and dangerous began to seem exotic, appealing and safe. Residents from all over the city travelled to Chinatown with the enthusiasm of tourists sampling foods, buying curios and savouring the district's distinctiveness. Chinatown's merchants and restaurateurs added glamour to the community's new image with gleaming neon signs.

View looking south along Carrall Street at East Pender. Photo, circa 1940.

In the 1960s, Vancouver planned its first major freeway to cut right through Chinatown. Citizens' action groups effectively intervened and caused the plan to be abandoned in 1968. The Province also recognized Chinatown's special history and architecture by designating it a historic district in 1971. In 1979, the Chinatown Historic Area Planning Committee sponsored a streetscape improvement program. Chinese-style elements, such as tile-red street lamps and specially paved sidewalk crosswalks, were introduced, reflecting the City's new appreciation of Chinatown as a civic asset.

1 Sam Kee Building

8 West Pender Street

The Sam Kee Company, one of Chinatown's wealthiest firms in the early 1900s, bought this land as a standard-sized lot in 1903. In 1912 the City widened Pender Street, expropriating 24 feet off the front. The architects Brown and Gillam designed this narrow, 6 foot wide steel-framed building in 1913. The basement, extending under the sidewalk, housed public baths; offices and shops were on the ground floor, and living quarters above. Rehabilitation of the building was by Soren Rasmussen Architect and completed in 1986. It is the thinnest building in the world according to the *Guinness Book of Records.*

2 Shanghai Alley

Due west of Carrall and Pender Streets

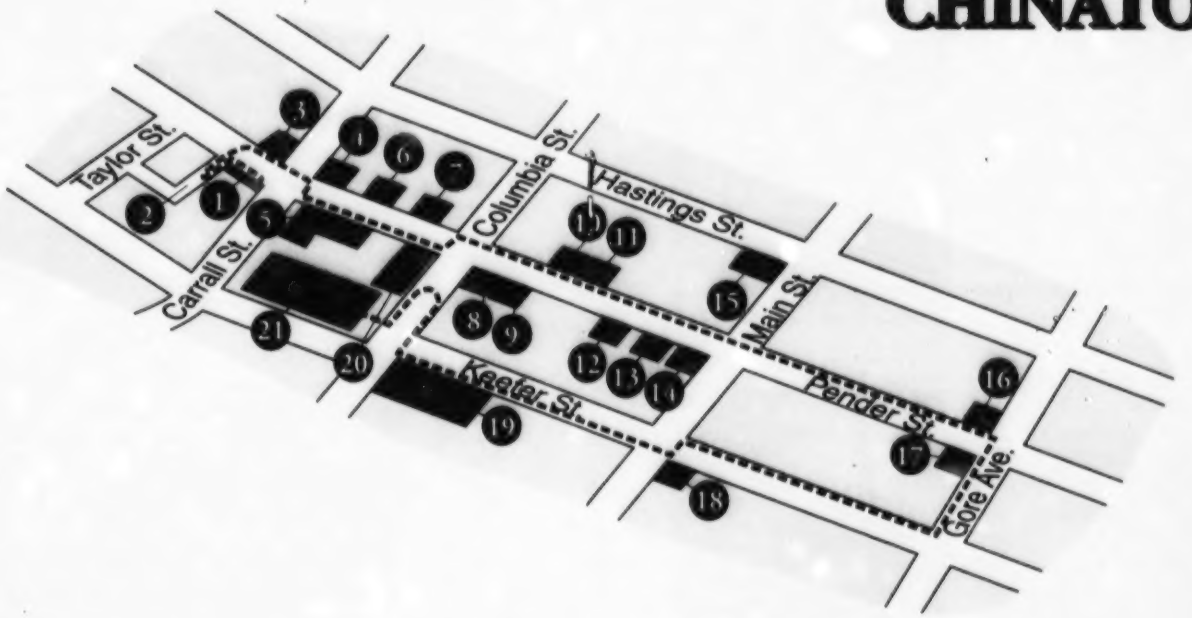
Responding to pressure from white merchants on Hastings Street, Chinese businesses moved south of Pender Street along Carrall Street after 1904. Many of the new buildings had double fronts, one side opening onto Carrall Street and the other onto Shanghai Alley. Eventually restaurants, stores, a theatre and several tenements crowded the narrow alley. A similar alley, Canton Alley, ran parallel one block west. Canton Alley and much of Shanghai Alley were demolished in the 1940s when non-Chinese industries began squeezing into the older, western edge of Chinatown. A portion of Shanghai Alley is re-instituted as part of a housing and commercial development planned for this site.

3 Chinese Freemasons Building

1 West Pender Street

Buildings in Chinatown blend Chinese and Western architectural treatments, sometimes in subtle ways. This 1901 building shows Chinese-influence recessed balconies along the Pender Street facade. Chinatown and Gastown were connected by Carrall Street; this facade is more convetional without recessed balconeys. The Chee Kung Tong (CKT) purchased the building in 1907 and was a powerful secret society that supported the 1911 Chinese rebellion led by Dr. Sun-Yat Sen. The CKT mortgaged this building to raise money for his cause. In 1920 the CKT changed its name to the Chinese Freemasons in an attempt to forge ties with white organizations.

CHINATOWN



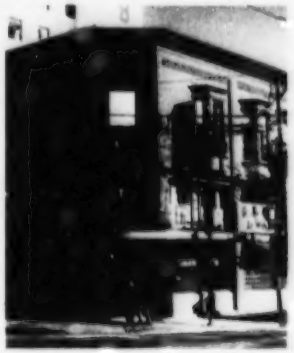
KEY

1. **Sam Kee Building** - *8 West Pender St.*
2. **Shanghai Alley** - *due west of Carrall and Pender St.*
3. **Chinese Freemasons Building** - *1 West Pender St.*
4. **Chinese Times Building** - *1 East Pender St.*
5. **Chinese Cultural Centre** - *50 East Pender St.*
6. **Yue Shan Society Headquarters** - *33–37 East Pender St.*
7. **Wing Sang Building** - *51–67 East Pender St.*
8. **Ho Ho Restaurant and Sun Ah Hotel** - *102 East Pender St.*
9. **Chinese Benevolent Association Building** - *108 East Pender St.*
10. **Mon Keang School** - *123 East Pender St.*
11. **Lee Building** - *129–131 East Pender St.*
12. **Chin Wing Chun Society** - *160 East Pender St.*
13. **Van City Building** - *178 East Pender St.*
14. **Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce** - *501 Main St.*
15. **Carnegie Centre** - *401 Main St.*
16. **Hotel East** - *445 Gore St.*
17. **Kuomintang Building** - *296 East Pender St.*
18. **Hong Kong Bank of Canada Building** - *600 Main St.*
19. **Chinatown Plaza** - *180 Keefer St.*
20. **Museum and Archives** - *555 Columbia St.*
21. **Dr. Sun-Yat Sen Garden** - *578 Carrall St.*

4 Chinese Times Building

1 East Pender Street

The Wing Sang Company commissioned a prominent Vancouver architect to design this building in 1902. W.T. Whiteway incorporated a "cheater storey" or mezzanine above the first floor, and seven oriel windows on the top floor. Cheater storeys were a common way of avoiding tax assessments on floor space. The *Chinese Times* newspaper has been published in Chinatown since 1914, and in this building between 1939 and 1994, when it ceased operation due to the introduction of Hong Kong-based daily newspapers in Vancouver.



5 Chinese Cultural Centr

50 East Pender Street

The Chinese Cultural Centre is an ambitious project that reflects Chinatown's continuing importance for Vancouver's Chinese-Canadians. Opened in 1981, the Cultural Centre houses classrooms, meeting rooms, exhibition space, an activity hall, a bookstore and a reading room. The gateway arch was erected in front of the pavilion of the People's Republic of China at Vancouver's Expo 86 and was moved to this location in 1987.

6 Yue Shan Society Headquarters

33–37 East Pender Street

W.H. Chow, the architect of this building erected in 1920, managed to surmount both the legal and the informal hurdles that prevented most of Vancouver's early Chinese from entering professions. Chow designed several other Chinatown buildings, including Ming's at 141–147 East Pender, which has been extensively altered over the years.

7 Wing Sang Building

51–67 East Pender Street

This group of structures was built over a 12-year period. The part inscribed "1889" is the oldest building in Chinatown. The brick addition and third floor were built in 1901 and designed by architect T.E. Julian. The Wing Sang Company was one of the wealthy firms at the top of Chinatown's pyramid of power. The firm prospered by supplying Chinese contract labourers to build the CPR, selling tickets for the CPR's steamship lines and operating a herring plant in Vancouver. Much of the interior of this building is still intact.

8 Sun Ah Hotel and Ho Ho Restaurant

102 East Pender Street

The Sun Ah Hotel's 48 rooms on the top three storeys were typical of the crowded lodgings for Chinese labourers early in the twentieth century. The Ho Ho Restaurant at ground level is typical of the post-war restaurants and curios shops that catered to tastes for the foreign and exotic. The building was built in 1911 and was designed by R.T. Perry and White and Cockrill. It was the site of the splendid "Ho-Ho Chop Suey" neon sign which was removed in 1997 for restoration. The sign's next location is undetermined.

9 Chinese Benevolent Association Building

108 East Pender Street

This building was completed in 1901 and is home to the Chinese Benevolent Association (CBA). With its stone fire walls, imposing four storeys plus pediment wall, and recessed balcony with ornate wrought iron railings, the CBA building played a symbolic and practical role within the Chinatown community. The CBA was organized in the late nineteenth century to represent Chinatown to the larger Vancouver community. The CBA led protests against repressive legislation, provided for Chinatown's poor during hard times, and sponsored Chinese-language schools.

10 Mon Keang School

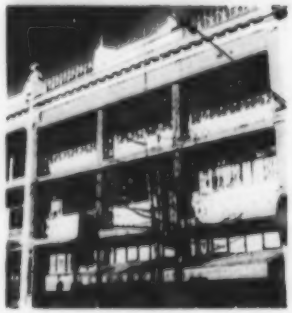
123 East Pender Street

A mutual assistance association based on a common surname, the Wong Benevolent Association built this structure in 1921 as their clan headquarters. Since 1925 Chinese children have attended after-school Chinese language classes on the second floor. In 1947, after the repeal of the Exclusion Act and the reunification of many families, the school began offering the first high school-level Chinese classes in Canada. Look for the recessed balconies, the stained glass window incorporating Chinese characters and the cheater storey. The building was designed by architects J.A. Radford and G.L. Southall.

11 Lee Building

129–131 East Pender Street

Another surname association headquarters, the Lee Building was built in 1907 and gutted by fire in 1972. Architects Henriquez and Todd preserved the original façade as a free-standing screen and built a new structure behind it.



12 Chin Wing Chun Society

160 East Pender Street

Constructed in 1925 as headquarters for a surname association, this building demonstrates the blending of influences in Chinatown's architecture. The architect, R. A. McKenzie, who practiced for more than five years in northern China, incorporated the recessed balconies common to tropical southern China in the building design. However, the crowning pediment supported by columns is pulled from the classical Western tradition.

13 Van City Credit Union

178 East Pender Street

This building served as branch for the Bank of Montreal from its completion in 1971 to 1992, when it relocated next door. With a recessed balcony, broken roof line and ornamental dragons, the design by architects Birmingham and Wood is an, early attempt to fit in with the revitalized streetscape.

14 Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce

501 Main Street

This is an extreme example of the tendency of banks in the first half of the twentieth century to seek imposing architectural styles, regardless of community context. The building was completed in 1915 and was designed by V.D. Horsburgh. Note the presence of the caduceus, a winged staff with entwined snakes, as a decorative element on the front of the building. This emblem, the symbol of medicine, was also a popular symbol of commerce.

15 Carnegie Centre

401 Main Street

This monumental Romanesque design with a domed and pillared porch was designed by G.W. Grant and built with the assistance of Andrew Carnegie funds to house Vancouver's public library in 1902-03. In 1957, the library relocated to Burrard Street and the Vancouver Museum, and City Archives used the building until they moved into new quarters in Vanier Park in 1968. The building was then converted to a community centre for the residents of the Downtown Eastside by architects Downs/Archambault in 1978-79.

16 Hotel East

445 Gore Street

Built in 1912 to a design by architect S.B. Birds, the top three floors of the Hotel East provided lodgings for recently arrived Chinese immigrants. The fresh produce shops at street level are now common throughout the city. In the 1880s and 1890s, growing and selling vegetables and fruits were occupations open to Chinese.

17 Kuomintang Building

296 East Pender Street

Clubs and associations in Chinatown mirrored changes in China's politics. The Kuomintang (KMT, or Chinese Nationalist League) built this as its western Canadian headquarters. The KMT supported Dr. Sun-Yat Sen, the 1911 rebellion, and the rebel government in southern China, where so many of Chinatown's immigrants had lived. During World War I, the northern Chinese Manchu Government persuaded its ally, Canada, to ban the KMT. The ban was lifted in 1919 and this building was constructed the following year to the design prepared by W. E. Sproat.

18 Hongkong Bank of Canada Building

600 Main Street

The Hongkong Bank of Canada is the prime tenant in this building designed by Wing Ting Leung Architects and opened in 1996. It includes many traditional architectural features such as a recessed balcony and heavy cornice, and an unusual round corner element. The construction of the building was welcomed as an indication of confidence in the future of Chinatown despite recent years of economic uncertainty.

19 Chinatown Plaza

180 Keefer Street

In response to competition from "new Chinatowns" in the suburbs, the merchants of historic Chinatown sought to attract shoppers through the construction of this 950-space parkade. Designed by Joe Wai Architects, the parkade has traditional features such as brick construction and a red-tile roof. The 1000-seat Floata Seafood Restaurant is a major attraction.

20 Chinese Cultural CentreMuseum and Archives Building

555 Columbia Street

The Museum and Archives Building is situated on the north-east corner of the Chinese Cultural Centre complex and is another building designed by Vancouver-based architect Joe Wai. It was officially opened in 1998.

21 Dr. Sun-Yat Sen Classical Chinese Garden

578 Carrall Street

The Dr. Sun-Yat Sen Classical Garden, designed by architect Joe Wai and landscape architect Don Vaughan, was completed in 1986. Built by artisans from China employing traditional techniques and materials, it is the only full-size classical Chinese garden outside of China. The entrance to the public side of the walled garden is accessed off Columbia Street. One may also experience a guided tour of the architectural component of the garden upon payment of an admission fee; this entrance is off Carrall Street.